Stress, Fatigue, and Burnout in Graduate Students

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Over the last 30 years, the importance of self-care for health and mental health professionals to maintain personal wellness, life balance, and compassion satisfaction has risen steadily (Crim et al., 2017; Figley, 1995; McCann & Perlman, 1990; Sprang et al., 2007; Stamm, 1995). Since the pandemic, this awareness has only increased (Lew et al., 2020). But does this ring true for graduate students? Research shows that graduate students are more than six times as likely to suffer from mental health challenges, including depression and anxiety, compared to the general population (Evans et al., 2018). What is driving this phenomenon and how is it being mitigated?

Graduate schools training future researchers, clinicians, and professors require students to endure and prove themselves in their fields of pursuit. From program applications and interviews to admission and geographic relocation, graduate students enter a world of rapidly firing curve balls, while attempting to balance life outside studies. Throughout their multi-year commitment, students hustle, juggling coursework, research, clinical training hours, personal family, and even part-time or full-time jobs.

Even when encouraging student self-care, their stressors are rarely extensively explored and often instead deemed part of the “journey”; when there is rare spare time, imposter syndrome looms: I’m not doing enough; What are my peers doing that I’m not? Imposter syndrome is starkly pervasive for graduate students due in part to an inherent sense of naivete as aspiring professionals. The pressure to not only excel in academics and research but also develop strong relationships with supervisors, collaborate and/or compete with peers, and begin to make oneself known on professional platforms, all with a hopeful eye to graduation and career, is just a sliver of the overwhelming stressors in the daily life of a graduate student. The latter adds to rates of depression and anxiety, with amelioration seeming grim.

Wolniewicz (1996) noted “perils and risks” of graduate school for students. Her study found that students “risk their health, financial security, and personal relationships... [feeling] pressure to prioritize academic achievement over all other values [privileging] academic assignments over personal activities, especially those related to their well-being” (p.1). For students...
of marginalized groups, including BIPOC, LGBTQ, those with disabilities, and of various ages and family constellations, these stressors are exacerbated by microaggressions woven throughout society, graduate programs, and training sites at individual, institutional, and structural levels. Given the often subtle, nebulous nature of microaggressions, academic pressures for these students are compounded, often further impacting their academic success and overall well-being. Linder et al. (2015) posited that microaggressions experienced may manifest as: “assumptions of criminality; ascriptions of intelligence; allegations of oversensitivity and white student denial of racism; isolation, marginalization, and tokenization” (p. 2). Microaggressions can thus lead to greater levels of emotional distress and a weakened sense of belonging (Clark et al., 2012; Torres et al., 2010).

Evans et al. (2018) identify a mental health crisis in the graduate trainee population. Carter (cited in APA, 2011, p.1) states self-care for students is an “ethical imperative.” With students’ growing cry for help, there is a dire need for self-care and work-life balance initiatives for graduate students, including adequate support from faculty and supervisors, and greater systemic change.

Psychology’s lack of significant mitigation of this crisis and imperative suggests we need new interventions, possibly a new frame for training successful, healthy professionals, with self-care and work-life balance as a central component in our career development from graduate school through professional retirement. Personal wellness and compassion satisfaction are vital for both aspiring and established psychologists ethically trekking over our career lifespan. Supporting students early for a smoother and sustained trajectory ahead is essential.

Complete references for this article can be found at www.cpapsych.org – select The California Psychologist from the Professional Resources menu.